

Jesus own explanation about why he teaches in Parables: Will we hear it?

Introduction:

Have you ever asked, Why did Jesus say this? :

***Mark 4:10** And when he (Jesus) was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. **11** And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, **12** so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”*

The question is valid and needs to be asked. The use of Isaiah 6:9-10 as part of the explanation as to why Jesus teaches in parables, often causes confusion for modern believers because they assume that this form of teaching is to simplify and clarify the message. Sometimes offense is quickly taken to any idea that parables may harden hearts and confirm unbelief. Isaiah 6:9-10 appears to be an enigma, particularly in the context of parable teaching. Therefore understanding why Jesus uses this passage in such a key way, has direct and significant pastoral implications for how we understand the ‘parables’ and how we ‘hear’ the Gospel message.

In seeking to suggest an answer to this question, I will first consider briefly the broad context in which Mark sets the questions about the parables and the crux of Jesus answer in Mark 4:11-12. Then secondly, by considering the context of Isaiah 6 and the meaning of v 9 & 10 before, in the third place, returning to the Mark’s Gospel to seek to understand the use Mark makes of this Isaiah reference.

The Context of the parable teaching in Mark 4 and the place of 4:12.

Mark has set his Gospel account in the context of the Old Testament warning to be prepared for the Lord’s coming (Mk 1:2-3). Will Israel be prepared to receive the Lord himself, his word and the Kingdom he brings? (Mk 1:14-15). The implications of Israel not being prepared becomes a major focus of this Gospel account. Mark’s purpose is to legitimize Jesus’ universal and authoritative call to receive him and follow him; it is a call to discipleship.¹ This is what it means to submit to God’s will. So, in reference to the parable teaching of Mark 4, it is the issue of hearing² that takes center stage.

While Mark 3:23 explicitly introduces ‘parables’ to the Markan record, it is the parable teaching in chapter 4, which develops an understanding of the purpose, significance and meaning

¹ Hans F. Bayer, *A Theology of Mark - The dynamic between Christology and authentic discipleship*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 24.

² Note: *akouw*, ‘to hear or listen’ is mentioned 14 times in Mark 4:1-34.

of the parables. The large crowd including the disciples were taught in parables (plural. 4:2), however Mark records this one, ‘the sower,’ emphasizing its importance (cf. 4:13). All are exhorted with the imperatives to “Listen” (4:3) and “hear” (4:9). The parable of the sower, “is in fact a parable about right hearing of parables.”³ There is here a “solemn call to attentive hearing.”⁴ For the original audience and for us, there is a need to pay close attention (cf 4:24). The key distinction in the parable of the sower is the different responses to the word sown. There is a sifting process going on.⁵ Those who are not fruitful are those who refuse to hear and refuse to obey God’s will, while those who are fruitful do the will of God and they embody the kingdom family (cf. Mark 3:35).

Mark 4:11-12 is recorded as the crucial hermeneutical key to the parable of the sower and its explanation. Mark has, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit adapted the original Isaiah text into the parable teaching context for theological purposes. The connection between Mark’s account and Isaiah is made with the contextual equivalents of how the Word of the Kingdom, and thus the King of the Kingdom, is received. Yet for us, these verses are not easy to fully understand,⁶ they are an enigma. Donahue gives an Excursus which he titles “The Enigma of Mark 4:10-12,”⁷ in which he explains the three basic options typically held by scholars, to absolve Jesus of blame for what is perceived as a ‘harsh saying,’ I summarize as follows: Option 1 which is split into two parts, 1a) is to interpret the present deterministic thrust as a mistranslation and then to retranslate it to see the “so that” (v 12a) “as a code word for the fulfillment of scripture rather than direct divine purpose” and the “lest they turn” is retranslated to “unless they turn.”⁸ Or Option 1b; it is claimed the “so that” “can mean either ‘purpose’ or

³ Klyne Snodgrass, “A Hermeneutics of Hearing Informed by the Parables with Special reference to Mark 4.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2004), 67.

⁴ William L. Lane, *Gospel according to Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974). 153.

⁵ Rikki E. Watts, “Mark,” in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson. (Grand Rapids. MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 207.

⁶ Morna D. Hooker, “Mark’s Parables Of the Kingdom (Mark 4:1-34).” in *The Challenge of Jesus Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longnecker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2000), 125.

“Probably the most debated passage in all of the Synoptic tradition is Mark 4:1-34. Within this passage the smaller unit of vv10-12 has proven to be the most problematic, particularly with respect to the question of exactly what function the paraphrase of Isaiah 6:9-10 is meant to have. Set in the context of the parable of the sower the Isaiah text provides the theological basis for the purpose (or nature) of Jesus’ parables and, indeed, possibly for his total ministry.” Craig E. Evans “The function of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark and John” *Novum Testamentum XXIV*, fasc. 2 (April 1982): 126.

“The citation has proven offensive to many interpreters.” Lane, 158-59.

⁷ John J. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (United States of America: Fortress, 1988), 40-42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

‘result’ so that the blinding is the result of Jesus’ parabolic teaching rather than its purpose.”⁹ Option 2 is to interpret the saying as that ‘of the early church, which betrays its perspective on salvation history.’ Mark then adopts this perspective and applies it to the parables. Option 3 is to interpret the saying as Mark’s conscious purpose, he included it in the account as part of the messianic secret. In order to consider this ‘enigma’ indicated by these various views, we must attempt to understand Jesus’ use of Isaiah 6 by looking at the original context of that passage and comparing it with the situation and circumstances in which we find it located in Mark’s account.

The Context of Isaiah 6:9-10:

The original context of Isaiah 6 is that of a rebellious, corrupt and estranged people, with a ‘sick head and a faint heart,’ with no soundness at all (Isa. 1:2-6a). Isaiah 1:1-2:5 is the overture, both to the whole of the book and specifically to chapters 1-12. God calls this faithless people in the midst of their sin, their sin of unbelief and unrighteousness (1:13-20), but they will not hear God’s word. Therefore judgment awaits (1:21-31). Judgment however is not the end of the story, Isaiah 2:1-5 shows that in the ‘latter days’ there will be a recreated Zion and the nations will stream to it. The Abrahamic blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3) will come. God will accomplish his purposes. However, Chapters 2-5 show the depth of rebellion, rejection and unbelief among the people of God. These are evidenced by the idolatry, injustice and unrighteousness which is prevalent and for which the leadership is primarily responsible (1:5-6, 23; 3:14-17). The people follow the downward lead so that the vineyard of the Lord does not bring forth good grapes, only wild ones. Therefore, God declares a series of woes against his vineyard, Israel and Judah (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6, God commissions Isaiah to bring the judgement of the Lord. For Isaiah this meant “he was to bring God’s word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity – for only the truth could win and change them; but in their negative response his hearers would pass the point of no return. The opportunity which could spell their salvation would spell their judgment.”¹⁰ The rebellion, idolatry and willful ignorance of God’s people will receive the judgement (6:9,10) in terms which relate directly with the picture of the idols they seek after. Like their idols they will not see, not hear and not understand (Just like the Gentiles. cf. Ps 115:4-8 and 135:15-18). Watts says:

Isaiah 6:9f introduces one of the more significant motifs of chapters 1-39: ‘the enigma of obduracy to Yahweh’s offer (which) runs through the whole of Isaiah’s activity’.

Presupposing a recalcitrant nation, Yahweh’s judicial blinding of the leadership as projected in 6:9ff is to be understood in terms of an ironic judgement upon the self-reliant

⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰ J. Alec. Motyer, *Isaiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. ed. Donald J. Wiseman, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 84.

wisdom of those who have rejected his word. The blatant refusal of the nation's wise ones to attend to Yahweh's instruction precedes and occasions Isaiah's mandate. This mandate, effected by means of parabolic 'child-signs' (8:18), then serves to confirm them, archetypically so in Ahaz, in their rejection of Yahweh's word. Trapped in their own wisdom, the leaders will remain 'blind' and 'deaf', which condition will ultimately lead to their destruction.¹¹

But the commission of Isaiah is the whole of 6: 9-13. There is hope to be found in the 'Holy seed' (6:13). "Even the harsh message of Isaiah seeks hearers and gains disciples (8:16-18)."¹² Chapters 7 -12 show there is hope in the one who will save, Emmanuel.

Klyne Snodgrass helpfully summarizes observations from Isaiah 6 as:

- 1) the harsh language of Isa 6:9-10 is a prophetic instrument for warning and challenge;
- 2) it expresses the certainty of God's coming judgment for a people who are past hearing;
- 3) the words of Isa 6:9 became the classic expression to speak of the people's hardness of heart; and
- 4) the proclamation still expects some (remnant) to hear and follow.¹³

Mark's use of Isaiah 6:

Close parallels may be drawn between the Isaiah 6 context and that of Mark 3:22-30.¹⁴ Firstly, consider the prominent opponents of Jesus: scribes, pharisees, chief priests, elders are all professionally concerned with the Law. They had a significant role as the nation's advisors, analogous to the 'wise' of Isaiah's day. As Isaiah's polemic is primarily against the leaders of Jerusalem, so also Mark says the scribes are 'from Jerusalem.' The open rejection of Jesus by these religious leaders appears for the first time in 3:22. Secondly, the confrontation between Yahweh and the Jerusalem leaders in Isaiah's account is in the context of divine kingship. So too, as Jesus comes to fulfill the promises of Isaiah, he comes proclaiming the kingdom, healing, cleansing and claiming Lordship in the forgiveness of sins and over the Sabbath (1:14 - 3:19). Mark's overall context is the proclamation of Yahweh's reign and the advent of the kingdom, as God comes in 'strength' (3:23-27). In Isaiah the leaders' hostility toward and rejection of Yahweh's instruction was a matter of their hard hearts before the judicial confirming blindness of

¹¹ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 194.

¹² Snodgrass, 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁴ Watts, 195-196.

Isaiah's ministry (Isa 6:9-13) So too in Mark.¹⁵ In both cases the rejection of Yahweh's word, either spoken by the lesser prophet, Isaiah, or by The Prophet, Jesus, is explicitly met with parabolic sayings. (Isaiah chapter 7 & Mk 3:23).

A number of similarities can be drawn between Mark 3:20-35 and Mark 4:1-34.¹⁶ Firstly, both concern kingdoms; 3:24 implies the Kingdom of Satan while 4:11, the Kingdom of God. Secondly, both the Scribes from Jerusalem (3:23) and outsiders (4:11) are addressed in parables. Thirdly, both have warnings about non-forgiveness. (3:29, 4:12). The literary proximity of the two passages and the similarities between them suggest that the parable teaching of chapter 4 flows out of the parabolic response to the open repudiation by the Jerusalem scribes to Jesus' person and works, his teaching and his miracles. Watts concludes that in view of the parallels of the context in both Isaiah and Mark, the use of Isaiah 6:9,10 suggests that the judicial blinding effected by Jesus parables "concerns those who steadfastly reject Yahweh's delivering activity manifest in Jesus."¹⁷ The resistance of Israel to Isaiah's message anticipates resistance to the Word of the Kingdom which Jesus brings and the consequence is a greater judgment.

If this is so, then 4:11-12 seems to be directed against those who categorically oppose Jesus and his ministry in 3:22-30, those who have become his enemies. These are now the 'outsiders' for whom the parables are words of judgment (4:12; cf. Mk:12:9). Jesus' natural family are also seen at this stage as those who are 'outside.' While they have concerns for Jesus and are misunderstanding him or may even think he is 'possessed' (3:21, 31-32),¹⁸ yet he doesn't condemn them as he does the religious authorities. While 4:11,12 is clear judgment for some, it is a clear warning to the others. The warning here applies to all, "Immanuel... becomes a word of judgement when not met with repentance and faith."¹⁹ Mark 4:21-25 is to be seen as a commentary on the parable teaching and reflects 4:10-13. It is the nature of parables that "they hide in order to reveal."²⁰ Mark 4:22 is the intent overall; everything will be made manifest, will be revealed in due time, nothing can remain hidden. Therefore as the lamp shines there is the call to hear well and pay attention (4:23). For those who rely on their own understanding and their own resource, what they have will also be taken away.

¹⁵ "Isaiah 6:9-10 comes as Yahweh's judicial response to a people and a leadership who have already repeatedly refused his overtures. The same considered refusal is manifest in Mark's account although...only the leadership have made this break and hence the greater possible 'openness' of the parables to the people at large 4:33." Watts, 208.

¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., 197-198.

¹⁸ Acts 1:14 notes that his family do come to faith in him. So Mark 3:20-35 is not a closed door for all.

¹⁹ Watts, 198.

²⁰ Snodgrass, 75.

Mark's theological purpose may be seen in the analogy he makes using the same concept and wording as Isaiah 6:9-10. In Mark 4:12, the order of seeing and hearing is reversed from Isaiah 6:9 but the same as 6:10b. Stein says that the "first two lines are an example of synonymous parallelism."²¹ Mark could be drawing attention to these verses as the Jewish hearers, familiar with the Isaiah passage would take note and may be further drawn to the emphasis on 'hearing.' Mark could also be linking the verse closer to the explanation of the parable of the Sower in Mark 4:13-20.²² The substitution of 'forgiven' for 'healed' (Isa. 6:10) may also reflect his emphasis that it is the Son of Man who forgives sins (Mk 2:10) and anyone who rejects him will not be forgiven. The use of Isaiah 6:9-10 would thus emphasize the serious implications of rejecting the word of the King of the Kingdom.

The warning was necessary, for while the secret has been revealed to the disciples (4:11), they too failed to understand Jesus' miracles (6:52) and his passion predictions (8:31-33; 9:32; 10:35-45). They were hard hearted (6:52; 8:17). Mark uses the warning language of Jeremiah 5:21 with the disciples in 8:18 however, it also has clear echoes of Isaiah 6:9-10 (cf 4:12). The disciples may have thought they were 'safe' as Jesus focuses on the hard hearts of those who are 'outside,' with Isaiah's warning. "However, Jesus warns his disciples (Mark 8:17-21), those on the 'inside,' of just that kind of hard-heartedness! It is therefore appropriate to conclude that what distinguishes the disciples from those 'outside' is that they remain under the influence of Jesus to change their hearts."²³ The same warning needs to be given today in our churches.

Conclusion:

I suggest that to understand the parables of Mark 4 particularly, you must take the whole of the private teaching of Jesus (v10-25) together while carefully noting Mark's summary statement in 4:33,34. Mark tells us that Jesus taught 'many things' (4:2) in parables, and that the twelve ask him about the parables (4:10), which implies there were others, yet Mark treats this Parable of the Sower as fundamental, as key to understanding all the rest (4:13). The explanation for this fundamental parable interrupts the sequence of parable teaching to illustrate the principle of 4:33-34, and as the explanation of Jesus' whole ministry, which is brought out in the whole of v10-25 and particularly in v14-20. These parables do reflect a response of rejection and

²¹ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 210.

²² "hearing is put second to stand closer to the emphasis on hearing in the immediately following explanation. Notably, in Isa 6:10 the order hearing-seeing is at first maintained in the order ears-eyes, but it is then reversed in the order eyes-ears....the mystery [v11] has to do with God's rule, not with Jesus' messiahship, with the speaking of the word, not with the person of Jesus." Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 201.

²³ Bayer, 70.

opposition toward him, yet they also reflect his ultimate triumph of the king and his kingdom. The kingdom is a growing seed (4:26-29), even the smallest of all seeds (4:30-32), it will grow and there is no stopping it, because it is God who purposes it and he will bring it to pass. Therefore the purpose of the kingdom parable teaching in Mark 4 is intended to enable hearing and elicit a response to the king and his kingdom which has drawn near (1:14-15). The relevance of the use of Isaiah 6 is a clear warning to all on how they hear. Will this teaching be met with hardness of heart or repentance and faith, even if the fullness of what is meant is yet to be understood? Will they stay 'with him' and 'hear him' or will they walk away, oppose him and be judged accordingly? While the secret things belong to God, in his grace he has revealed all we need for salvation and life. Perhaps William Lane has the best advice on the matter when he says, "Only through revelation does the enigma become partially resolved; not until the consummation (to take the perspective of the parables) will it become resolved for all men."²⁴

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²⁴ Lane, 173

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